Background notes

European Response to the Rising Instability and Threats in the Southern Mediterranean and the Middle East

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As a result of geographic, climatic, political, demographic and economic change and challenges, the Middle East has been the epicentre of new conflicts on numerous occasions. This millennium came with great and unexpected changes in the southern Mediterranean region and the Middle East. With the emergence of new political players having regional and even global ambitions, 2014 marked a new era in relations between Europe and its neighbours to the south and in the Middle East. Numerous changes have made the political arena in this region more complex and characterised by recurring long-term or cyclical conflicts, rather than lasting peace. The countries covered in this paper manifest the trends described below.

Demographic and economic changes in many countries in this region have led to rapid reproduction of population and thus have created a need for subsequent substantial structural changes. The inability of many countries to create a labour market that includes young people has caused high long-term unemployment and subsequent social dissatisfaction which can be used *inter alia* by Islamic parties for political goals as their economic platforms focus on social justice and thus are attractive to the impoverished masses. For example, more than half of the population in the two most turbulent countries – Syria and Libya – is below 34 years of age, and the level of unemployment in certain social groups is by 30%[1] higher than prior to the onset of civil war. National economic structures are dependent on products with low added value (raw materials, agricultural produce), and production capacities in relevant sectors are very low due to political shocks, lack of export products and climate change. The situation is further exacerbated by poverty and lack of potable water; therefore, as a result of increasing number of internal problems, there is fertile soil for fomenting discontent with the regime in power. Unfortunately, the most stable countries of the region such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, or even Western countries are unable to ensure long-term effects of development cooperation projects because of short-sighted planning and inefficient project management.

Political dissatisfaction has arisen not only because the local political elite has failed to solve internal contradictions, but also because foreign players, including radical religious groups, have successfully taken advantage of and even aggravated the situation. The Arab Spring, which began with such elation and hopefulness among European countries and local Arab populations that a new democratic community would be forged, has since turned into an Arab Winter in many countries in the region. There is relative stability and even democratisation in countries such as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, Jordan, Oman, Kuwait, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, while Egypt, Yemen, Bahrein, and particularly Libya, Syria, Iraq and Sudan, are among the politically less stable countries. Disappointment and inability to find new elements that would consolidate national identity of states

[1] Libya. *CIA World Factbook*, 2015, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ly.html; Syria. *CIA World Factbook*, 2015, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html

and societies have increased the power of religious hard-liners. The success or failure of the Arab Spring, as well as the political vacuum caused by the lack of legitimacy of transitional governments and institutions in the eyes of the majority, have led to the current situation in several countries of the southern Mediterranean region and the Middle East.

Struggle against change has become the focal element of regional conflicts and has even resulted in forming new political and military forces which overtly take an orthodox approach not only to religion but also to the economic, social and political system. The Arab Spring and the spread of ideas promoted by modern technologies have led to new currents in traditional Islamic communities. The outcome of the Arab Spring in the relatively stable countries is the reason why extremist organisations, particularly Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, are trying to gain dominance in the entire region and are actively participating in escalating the situation in the less stable countries suffering from internal conflicts and ravaged by civil wars. The increasing activity of religious fundamentalists and Al-Qaeda corresponds not only to demographic and economic processes but also to political ones. That is, in order to maintain their position in the fight against modern and increasingly popular liberal political values, the fundamentalist ideas have to gain broader representation, *inter alia* at the government level. Therefore, currently the region is experiencing a counter-revolutionary fight against modern and liberal ideas which are not only being spread by European countries but also have already been embraced by some Arab Spring countries. The popularity of radical ideas is increasing particularly in regions and countries devastated by long-term warfare, where the lack of consolidated power has resulted in even greater social tensions, poverty, injustice and increasing friction between Sunnis and Shiites. Radical Islamism is being spread not only in the form of information but also through conventional warfare.

The **Islamic State** is the brightest example of how these radical political and military methods can be used in strengthening Islamic fundamentalism. The ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) a.k.a. the ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), which proclaimed itself to be a worldwide caliphate and named itself the Islamic State in 2014, has become one of the main challenges not only to the Arab countries but also to the global Islamic community, the European Union and many other countries which are against the legitimisation and strengthening of a new religious force with a potentially long-term and far-reaching political impact. Besides the European Union and the United States, there are 59 other countries which have shown opposition, including by military means, to the Islamic State, thus highlighting the significance of the threat posed by the Islamic State to global politics. This terrorist formation advocates the enforcement of the Sharia law in all spheres of life, with the intention of restoring the standard of living in the Arab world that existed at the dawn of Islam. The Islamic State positions itself as the only and the best organised political, economic and military force in the region by appealing to the global unity of Muslims and the need to review the political geography created after World War I; by offering a symbolic unifying leader – caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who is claimed to be a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed; by cultivating the perception of Europe and the United States as the enemies; and by applying brute force even against peaceful civilians and moderate Muslims.

Threats posed by the Islamic State's policy also stem from several aspects. It has a state-like internal organisation, which means that it cannot be regarded as merely a terrorist organisation although many powerful countries list it as such. The Salafi movement (Wahhabi mission) of the Islamic State is a part of the radical Sunni world, whose like-minded groups can be found among Al-Qaeda, as well as in Saudi Arabia. Estimates of the number of combatants of the Islamic State differ

greatly, ranging from as few as 32,000 to as many as 200,000[2]; however, with powerful propaganda, an actual system of governance, a legal and economic system, as well as ability to supply food to nearly eight million inhabitants[3] residing in the vast area of its governance, the Islamic State has managed to create noteworthy resistance to many stronger political players not only in the region but also in areas beyond the reach of modern weapons at its disposal. The Islamic State has attracted to radicalism and recruited thousands of people from war-ravaged countries, as well as wealthy and democratic European states.

Foreign fighters is a term which became topical in 2014, when schemes of recruiting new followers and fighters for the Islamic State from the European Union and other states were identified. Furthermore, not only foreign fighters but also radical Muslim cells and individuals located throughout the European Union have become a serious threat, particularly in 2015. The Islamic State with its propaganda, achievements and totalitarian-style discipline, which seems attractive to many disoriented people, has managed to recruit reinforcements for its activities in Iraq and Syria, as well as for terrorist activity in the European Union. This was proved by the terrorist attacks registered in 2015, including the attack at the editorial offices of the magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in January 2015, and terrorist attacks in Copenhagen in February 2015. As a result, domestic terrorism is once again on the agenda of the European Union as the level of threat and information about prevented terrorist attacks have become weekly news items. It is further augmented by the increasing number of immigrants entering Europe from the conflict-torn regions in the southern Mediterranean and the Middle East. Stopping the influx of immigrants is increasingly often recommended not only as an economic and social necessity but also as a prerequisite for security. After gaining military experience in the Islamic State or other combatant groups, fighters return to Europe, particularly France, the United Kingdom, as well as Spain and Germany, and become potential threats to the European community. This is why the Islamic State and its fighters are geographically and operationally closer to Europe than any other Islamic extremist organisation, including Al-Qaeda or Taliban, has ever been.

Challenges posed to the European Union and the international community by the Islamic State are significant from the perspective of security and immigrant flows, as well as from a geopolitical perspective. The Islamic State has created a counterforce to conventional warfare used by U.S.-led coalition forces, the Iraqi government or the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad; it has spread its roots into Iraq and Syria with the potential of expanding to adjacent countries and even to Chechnya and Afghanistan. The Islamic State has proclaimed itself to be a worldwide caliphate and thus is challenging other global Muslim organisations. If it achieves political and military success, the number of its radical followers might increase. This has united former opponents, including bringing Kurds into the fight against the Islamic State, and has even prompted the U.S. to seek new approaches with regard to Iran and its nuclear programme. EU member states are well aware of how important it is to ensure stability and strengthen moderate Islamic regimes in the countries of the southern Mediterranean region and the Middle East which serve as an example to those countries which are currently being ravaged by violence. Therefore, political and project-based support to the stable countries is essential because it would lessen the attractiveness of the ideas proposed by the Islamic State and would reduce the immigrant flows from other destabilised countries.

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[2] Patrick Cockburn. War with ISIS: Islamic militants have army of 200,000, claims senior Kurdish leader. *The Independent*, 16.11.2014., http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/war-with-isis-islamic-militants-have-army-of-200000-claims-kurdish-leader-9863418.html
[3] Graeme Wood. What ISIS Really Wants? *The Atlantic*, 2015, http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/

The Union for the Mediterranean and the Southern Dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy are significant multilateral formats used for shaping and strengthening relations with countries in the Middle East and the southern Mediterranean region. The European Union is increasingly actively using these formats for political interaction and has started to couple its traditional approaches to cooperation based on integration, economics and politics with elements of normative power. Revitalisation of the Union for the Mediterranean is a topical subject in light of the set goal – to establish the political affiliation with countries of the southern Mediterranean region and the Middle East and involve them in EU processes. The geopolitical element of the European Neighbourhood Policy is persistent; however, now it also linked with the need to create a security area within and around Europe.

Issues for discussion:

1. How to undermine the image of the Islamic State in the eyes of disoriented people?
2. Will the regimes of relatively stable Arab Spring countries continue to liberalise? Will they remain stable?
3. Was it a mistake to support the Arab Spring in Syria and Libya?
4. Is the promise of economic integration into the European Union sufficient for the countries of the region?
5. Has the institutionalisation of the Union for the Mediterranean resulted in the expected impulse for cooperation?
6. Is decreasing the immigrant flows from conflict areas a realistic goal?
7. Technological aspects and restricting free use of the Internet in the name of the fight against terrorism.
8. Can foreign fighters be de-radicalised and reintegrated into the European community?
9. What will be the future role of Kurds in Iraq and Syria after victory over the Islamic State?
10. How should the European Union respond if Islamic parties gain political power through democratic elections in the Middle East (Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas)?